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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS JORDANIAN MINISTER OF ENVIRONMENT
TO PROMOTE ENVIRONMENTAL COOPERATION

Ref: Amman 312

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. In a June 2 courtesy call on the Jordanian Minister of Environment, Dr. Mohammed Thuneibat, the Ambassador commended the minister for his leadership of Jordan's newest ministry and impressed upon him the need for an environmental regulatory and enforcement body to complement the country's economic development and trade goals. The Jordan FTA, both agreed, was at the vanguard for its environmental clauses. Wanting to fulfill its FTA commitments, the Minister is keen to make the Joint Environmental Forum a success. Post is trying to identify an NSF Science Fellow from EPA who could provide technical assistance on the ministry's organizational structure and mission, helping make a more effective environmental watchdog for Jordan. A regional Arab-Israeli hazardous waste training workshop got the Minister's rapid approval for Jordanian participation. END SUMMARY.

2. (SBU) Although the Jordanian Ministry of Environment was created earlier this year (reftel), the death of the minister's wife and the Iraq conflict made an earlier courtesy call by the Ambassador impossible. The Minister, however, is known to post in his other capacity as Minister of Administrative Development. Accompanied by the USAID Mission Director, USAID Water and Environment Sector Chief, and the NEA Regional Environment Officer, the Ambassador met with Minister Thuneibat on June 2 to invite his impressions of the ministry and to solicit his vision for moving Jordan's environmental agenda forward in a manner consistent with its economic and trade goals.

3. (SBU) After the Ambassador's inquiry about his plans for the ministry and its role as Jordan's environmental regulatory and enforcement agency, the Minister candidly described the weak personnel and institutional capacity he inherited from the General Corporation for Environmental Protection (GCEP), the precursor to the ministry. He ventured that no more than 75 of the 170 employees are qualified at their jobs, but he hoped to change that through technical assistance and capacity building. Already he has aggressively advertised for new talent for the ministry, something that has raised the ire of its permanent employees who fear being replaced or sidelined. An external review of the ministry and its personnel conducted this spring, while lauded by many outside observers as an appropriate objective evaluation of the institution, was met with resistance by longtime civil servants. Nevertheless, Thuneibat seems determined to hone his new ministry into an effective agency and he claims to have the financial support from the Minister of Planning to do so.

4. (SBU) Turning to the Joint U.S.-Jordanian Environmental Forum, which we had hoped to convene in Amman earlier this year, the Ambassador suggested that it could be convened concurrently with the FTA Joint Commission in the fall timeframe. The Minister, enthusiastic about the prospect of this policy dialog on trade and environment issues and the attendant technical assistance, pledged to work to make this happen. The inception meeting will likely focus on how we might be able to assist the new ministry in building its environmental management capacity so that it can meet its FTA obligations. It remains unclear, however, who from the Jordanian side will participate, but we expect both the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Industry of Trade to play significant roles.

5. (SBU) The Ambassador also described our efforts to identify a visiting Science Fellow from EPA to review the Ministry of Environment's organizational structure and its mission, offering advice on how to become a more effective regulatory and enforcement agency. While he told the Minister we cannot guarantee that an appropriate individual will be identified, the Ambassador remains hopeful that this cost-free opportunity for an experienced USEPA official to share expertise in the early stages of a new ministry will

materialize. 6. (SBU) Finally, the NEA Regional Environment Officer spoke of post's efforts to organize a regional workshop on hazardous waste management for Jordanians, Palestinians, and Israelis. We informed the Minister that EPA had developed a draft training module for the core parties and we have already sought input from the regional technical experts so that the workshop better meets the needs of all. A planning meeting is scheduled for late June, at which we hope to finalize the agenda and training module. We expect to convene the workshop in early August at which at least five technical hazardous waste experts from each of the parties will be invited to participate. The Minister, recognizing this as an opportunity for his personnel to receive some excellent up-to-date training on this critical issue for the Middle East, fully supported this regional initiative. 7. (SBU) BIOGRAPHIC INFORMATION: Thuneibat was quick to point out to the Ambassador that he is one of 5 ministers in the Abu Al-Ragheb government who has, without interruption, served in the cabinet for the past 6 years. He currently wears two hats-as Minister of Administrative Development and as Minister of Environment. He temporarily was Minister of Culture in the second cabinet reshuffle of the Abu Al-Ragheb government from October 2001 until January 2002. Thuneibat is a member of the Civil Service Council and the Royal Commission for Administrative Reforms as well as being the head of the Arab Association for Administrative Development. He served as Minister of Administrative Development from 1994-95 in a previous government. Clearly a specialist in public administration and human resources, his current appointment to the newly created Ministry of Environment has been interpreted as a signal that he is to "build" it up. It is expected that, once he completes this task (which he estimates could take up to one year), a technocrat with environmental expertise will likely take over. Thuneibat, a Muslim East Banker, hails from the city of Kerak where he was born in 1950. He attended the University of Jordan, where he studied political science, and took his PhD in Human Resources Management from the University of Southern California. Thuneibat has a confident air about him and appears gregarious and outgoing. 8. (SBU) COMMENT: Although some individuals are critical that Thuneibat, who has no environmental background, was named to the post, our working level contacts within the ministry shared with us their initial enthusiasm for his strong management style and leadership. That said, we are also hearing grumbling that his low esteem for the current staff is not helping morale. However, one international donor who works closely with the ministry told us that they thought Thuneibat's confidence in 40 percent of his employees was generous-in their estimation, they could only come up with about 10 competent employees. Clearly, the ministry needs significant assistance in capacity building and reforming the former GCEP into a robust regulatory and enforcement watchdog for Jordan. GNEHM